

Quotas on it

Young children may benefit from having more male teachers

CRITICS OF affirmative action, discrimination to promote diversity, say favouring less-qualified candidates is unfair and leads to worse outcomes. A new study shows the trade-off can be more subtle. Ursina Schaede of the University of Zurich and Ville Mankki of the University of Turku found that after Finland abolished a quota ensuring gender balance among primary-school teachers, pupils suffered.

Often quotas favour women. In primary schools it is men who are scarce. Until 1989 the quota ensured at least 40% of those enrolling in Finnish primary-teacher training courses were male. Selection was otherwise based in part on a nationwide matriculation exam taken at the end of secondary school. The quota meant women on the margin of admission lost out to men, despite having higher test scores.

The study followed all 81,000 children who entered Finnish primary schools between 1988 and 2000. The authors estimated their exposure to “quota men” and “marginal women” by looking at how many teachers in each municipality reached 60, the mandatory retirement age, each year. After the quota was abolished retirees were replaced with rookies who had been selected without its influence.

At age 25, pupils estimated to have had less exposure to quota men were less likely to be employed or studying and less likely to have a degree or advanced vocational qualification. Girls were less likely to have studied technical subjects and more likely to have been pregnant. Because variation among places in mandatory retirements was all but random, these effects were probably caused by the quota.

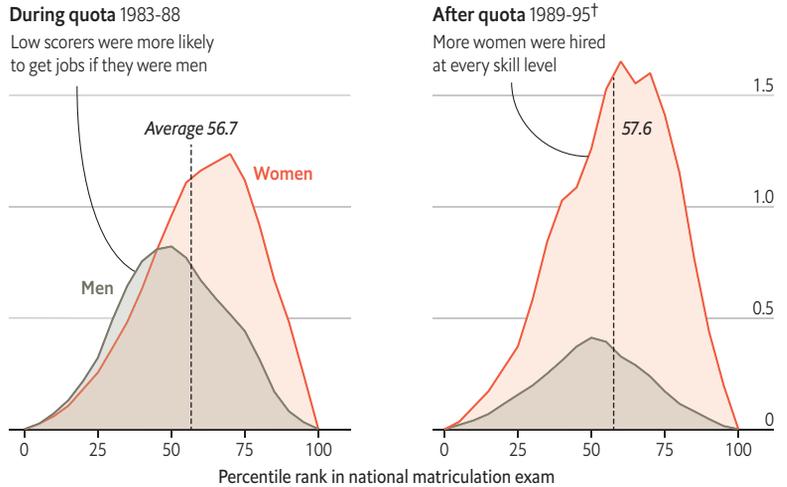
How did quota men help? Not by acting as role models for boys. Their influence on boys and girls was roughly similar. There is also no proof that diversity mattered. The quota’s effect was no greater in places particularly short of men, although the estimates of this difference were imprecise.

Ms Schaede suggests that quota men may simply have been better at the job than marginal women. Male and female teachers differ. Men were more likely to speak Finnish as their mother tongue and to have studied mathematics. Perhaps these or other characteristics helped their teaching.

In other words, the selection criteria for teachers may have elevated candidates who were less suitable—exactly the outcome critics of quotas fear. ■

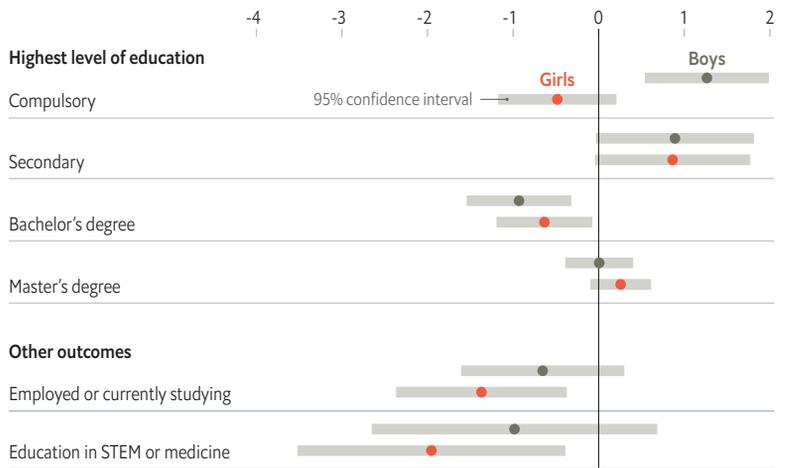
→ In 1989 Finland abolished its quota for male primary-school teachers

Distribution* of primary-school teachers’ scores in matriculation exam, %



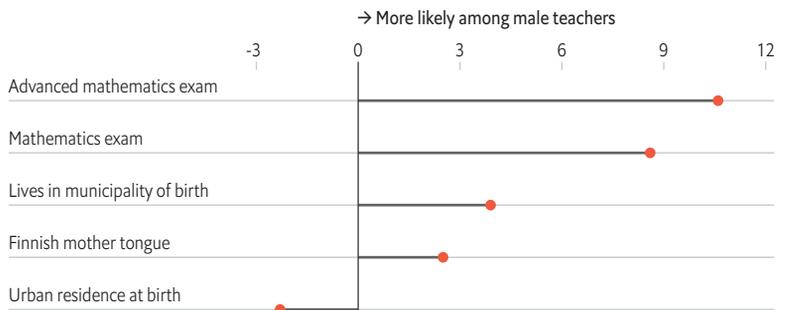
→ After the quota was scrapped, life outcomes for pupils worsened

Change in probability of a given outcome by age 25 associated with a two percentage-point decrease* in male quota teachers, percentage points



→ Male teachers were more likely to be native Finnish speakers and to have mathematics qualifications

Difference between men and women during quota, percentage points



*Smoothed †No data for 1990 ‡Change associated with a 10% annual retirement rate between 1989 and 1995
Source: “Quota vs quality? Long-term gains from an unusual gender quota”, by Ursina Schaede and Ville Mankki, working paper, April 2022.